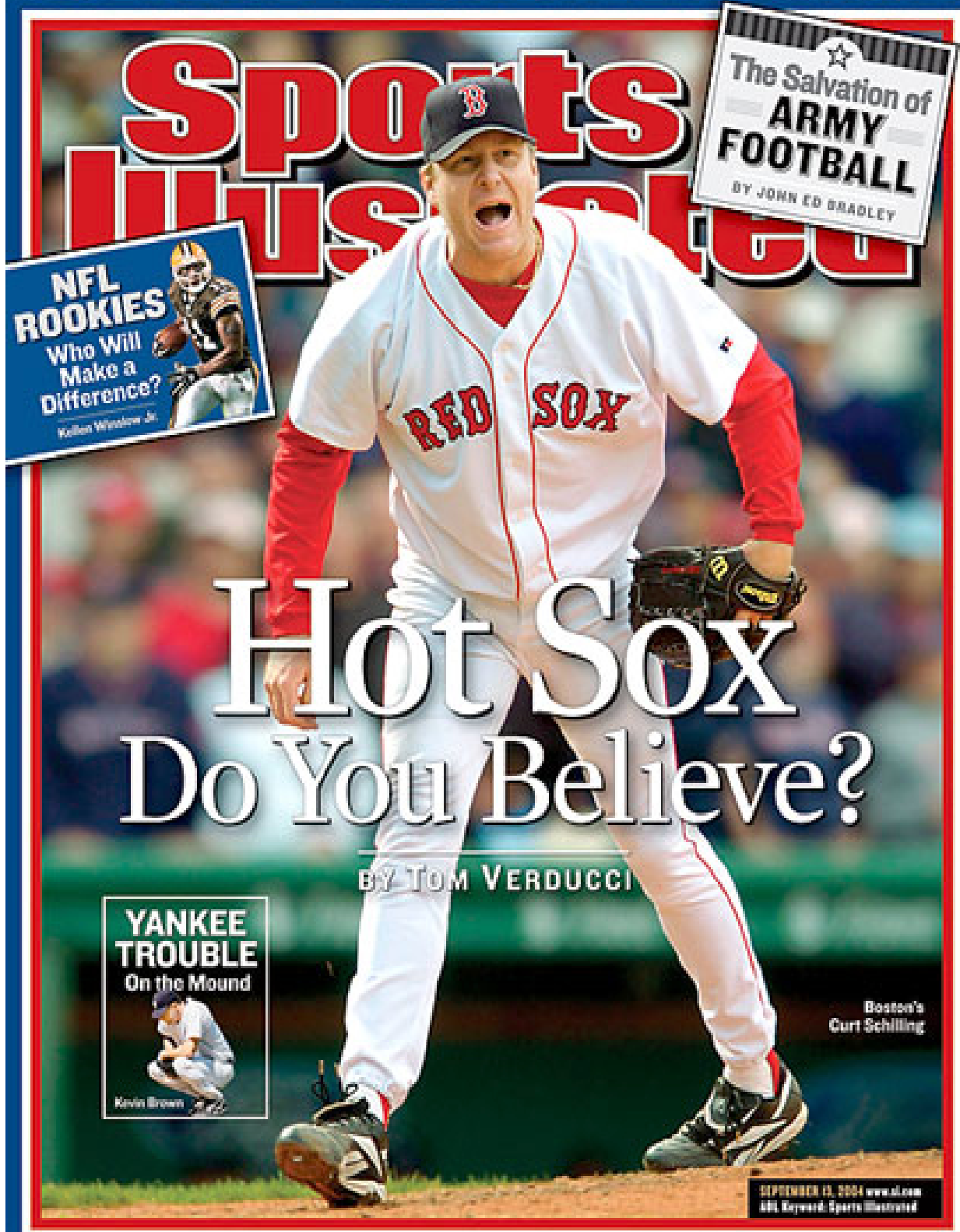


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**NFL
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Who Will
Make a
Difference?
Kellen Winslow Jr.

**The Salvation of
ARMY
FOOTBALL**
BY JOHN ED BRADLEY

Hot Sox Do You Believe?

BY TOM VERDUCCI

**YANKEE
TROUBLE**
On the Mound
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Army Salvation

WHY WOULD 67-YEAR-OLD BOBBY ROSS
LEAVE A LIFE OF LEISURE TO TAKE OVER
THE WORST TEAM IN COLLEGE FOOTBALL?

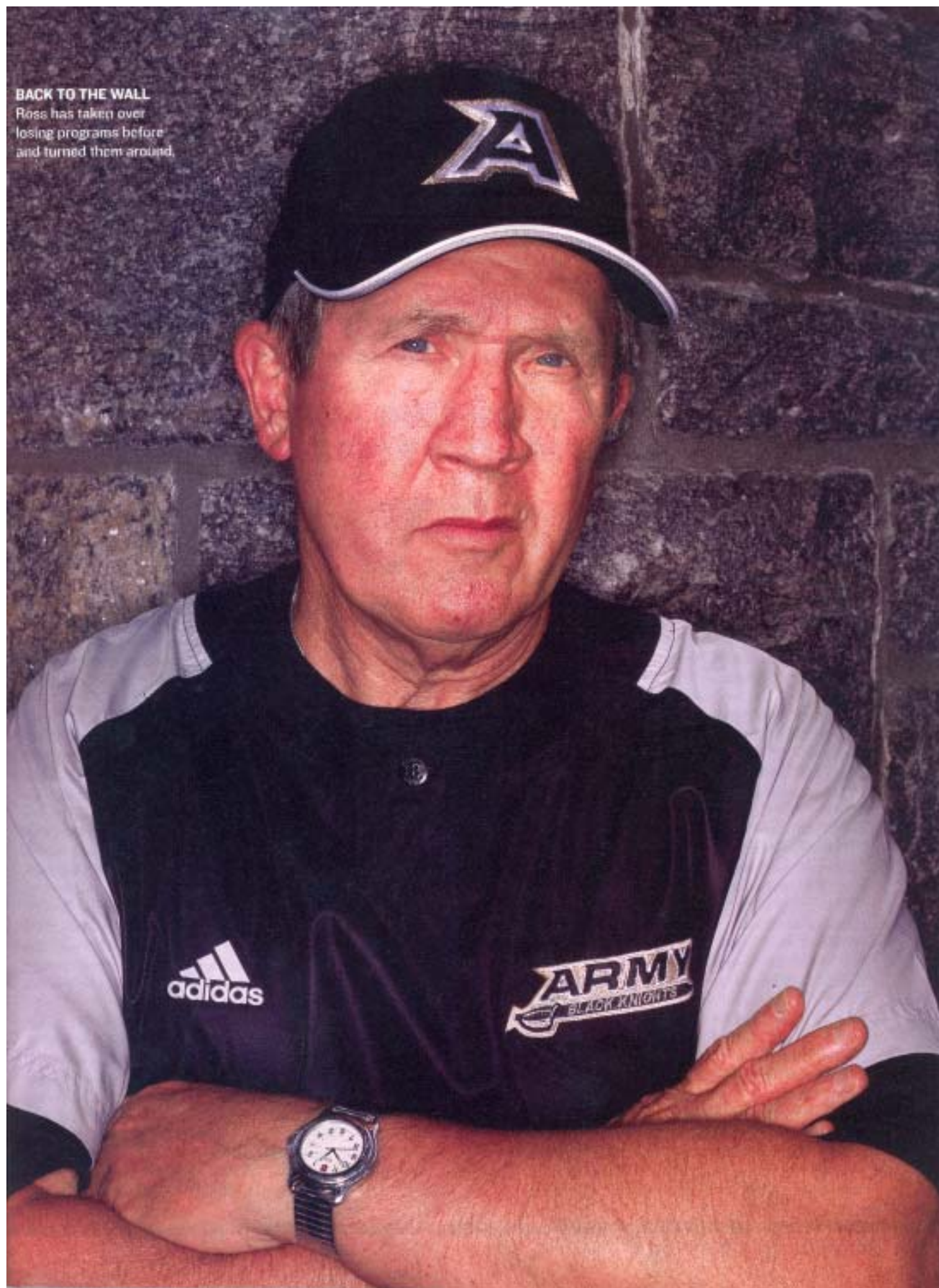
BY JOHN ED BRADLEY

photograph by Peter Gregoire

The John Deere riding mower and the 3½ acres weren't enough. Driving cancer patients to the hospital wasn't enough, and delivering meals to the elderly wasn't either. He served on boards at both his old high school and his old college. Not enough. He lifted weights, used a treadmill and ran loops around a track. He went to church and went to the post office and went to the bank and went to the drugstore. He went wherever his wife, Alice, asked him to go, with the exception of the supermarket. He let her shop for groceries. Otherwise, honey-do's were his specialty: "Honey, do this. Honey, do that."

BACK TO THE WALL

Ross has taken over
losing programs before
and turned them around.





Bobby Ross might've been retired from coaching, but he was busy. He made sure to keep his days full and to end them at 5 p.m., the way they ended for most people with jobs. Oh, and he read books.

Once he even read a book during the daytime. The Rosses have been a couple since they were in high school, and for Bobby to sit in a chair and read a book during the daylight hours... well, Alice stood there speechless, her mouth open in a perfect circle.

By then two years had passed since Ross had resigned as coach of the Detroit Lions and walked away from a career that included a share of the national championship, at Georgia Tech in 1990, and a Super Bowl appearance, with the San Diego Chargers in

of it," he went on, "because I am old, and they're not going to be interested. But what do you think?"

And that is how it started.

NOT MUCH more than a year later, in December 2003, Ross abandoned his retired life in Lexington, Va., and landed at the U.S. Military Academy at West Point, N.Y., as coach of perhaps the weakest program in Division I-A football. Last year Army went 0-13, the worst single-season record in major college football history. The Black Knights have lost 24 of their last 25 games. In recent years they have also been dominated by the other service academies, losing 14 of their last 15 games with Air Force and five of their last seven with Navy. The

FOR YOUNGER COACHES, WEST POINT IS WHERE YOU GO TO SEND YOUR CAREER SCREECHING INTO REVERSE

1995. He left nine games into the 2000 season—when the Lions were a respectable 5-4—without holding a press conference to explain why. Speculation had him suffering from burnout, but in fact he wasn't well physically. Ross, then 63, made no mention of his health in the announcement he issued through the team's p.r. department, but for months he had been suffering from blood clots in his right leg, one above the knee, another below it. Clots had contributed to his father's death in 1996, and Ross worried that they might hasten his.

"Keep your toes to your nose," his doctor instructed him.

"Toes to my nose?" Ross asked. "How am I supposed to do that and coach a football team?"

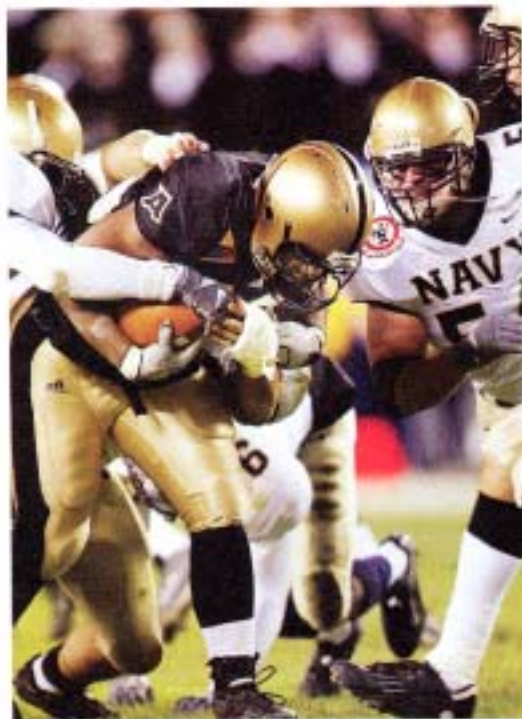
Over time a regimen of blood-thinning medication dissolved the clots, and Ross began to wonder if he'd bowed out too soon. He still had energy, God knows, and the game hadn't changed that much since he'd left. "It's a shame you're not 10 or 20 years younger," Alice told him, "because you still have so much more to give."

Whenever somebody asked him if he missed football, Ross invariably answered, "I miss competing."

Competing with whom? Competing for what?

"Just competing," said Ross.

"What do you think if I look into it?" he asked Alice not long after she caught him reading that book during the daytime. He didn't have to tell her what it was. "I don't think much will come



COMPANY, HALT The Black Knights hardly ran the football last season and got nowhere when they did.

lone coach to have had a winning percentage over .500 at West Point in the last 30 years, Jim Young, finished his eight-year run there in 1990. Though Young's percentage was only .566, he's revered today by Army fans who regard his six winning seasons and three bowl appearances as proof that the Black Knights can still compete with the nation's top programs.

Army had three coaches between Young and Ross, and their winning percentages were .445, .125 and .000. The last of them, John Mumford, served as interim coach for seven games last season, after the academy fired Todd Berry last October. "If you coach, you coach to win, first and foremost," says Mumford. "And to be part of an institution with a history as storied as this one's... well, when you're in the Army there is no second place. So it's very disheartening what we've gone through here. No, *horrible* might be a better word to describe it."

To a veteran coach like Ross, who's old enough to remember when Army was the best football school in the country, the job comes wrapped in the stars and stripes. It represents a chance to serve your country. But to a younger generation of coaches, West Point is where you go when you have an urge to send your career screeching into reverse. The academy's high academic standards prevent coaches from recruiting many top high school players, and the players who get in are obligated to spend five years in the Army after they graduate. About half of the players approached by the coaches re-

CHUCK SCHULMAN

ject the school because they don't want a future in the military.

The war in Iraq has cost Army a few potential recruits as well. "Maybe two percent of those I contact bring up the war," says offensive coordinator Kevin Ross, Bobby's son. "To those kids I say, 'All right, then. Good luck.' I don't waste any time on them. You can't talk those kids into coming here, you know? And then I put the phone down and say, 'Thank you very much. Somebody else will defend the blanket of freedom you're sleeping under tonight. Don't worry about it. We'll take care of it for you.'"

Air Force and Navy face similar problems in recruiting, but other factors have contributed to their success against Army. Air Force, a member of the Mountain West Conference, wins games because

man Trophy winners, and celebrities traveled up the Hudson River from New York City to attend home games, adding more glamour to a place already dripping with it. The Ross family had a gossamer-thin connection to the academy. When Bobby's father was in high school, he won an appointment to West Point. To a child of the working class there were few greater honors, but Leonard Aloysius (Bus) Ross was forced to decline the opportunity, what with his family needing him to work.

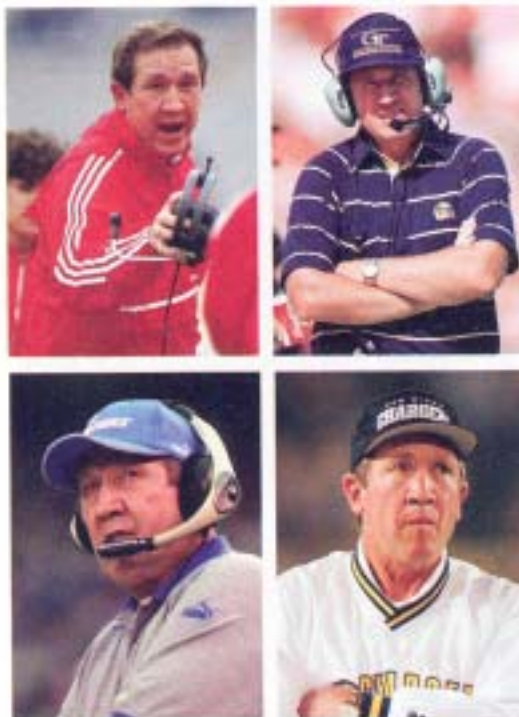
Bobby would have the military education that his father was denied. He attended Richmond's Benedictine High, an all-male military school run by Benedictine fathers, and then he enrolled at Virginia Military Institute in Lexington. Two of his three sons would graduate from military academies—Chris, now a lieutenant

WHEN SOMEBODY ASKED HIM IF HE MISSED FOOTBALL, ROSS INVARIABLY ANSWERED, "I MISS COMPETING"

it has had a fine, innovative coach in Fisher DeBerry for the past 21 years. Air Force and Navy are also more attractive to teenage prospects who grew up on movies and video games that glamorize the lives of jet-fighter pilots and make the Army's work look far less appealing by comparison. Navy has struggled on the field almost as much as Army in recent years, but as an independent it has the freedom to schedule weaker opponents. Army's Conference USA affiliation, on the other hand, prevents it from padding its schedule with confidence-builders. Each season the Black Knights are locked into eight conference games, plus Air Force and Navy, leaving them only one week to schedule a pushover. Army will leave Conference USA after this season, which should help the school find more wins. "I don't know of any reason why we can't be a top 25 team," says Mumford, "even with the things we have to overcome."

"It takes a special person to come here," says Connor Crehan, a junior reserve quarterback from Plainfield, N.J. "We might not get the top players in the country, but that's no excuse. We still get players who are good enough to win ball games."

BOBBOY ROSS was born in 1936, and as he grew up in Richmond, he listened to Army games on the radio and followed the team in the paper. The Black Knights were then a football power and a symbol of the strength of the U.S. armed forces. They won national championships and produced Heis-



ROSS has run the show at (clockwise from top left) Maryland, Georgia Tech, San Diego and Detroit.

colonel in the Air Force, from the Air Force Academy; and Kevin, a former Marine, from the Naval Academy—and one of Bobby's two daughters would marry an Annapolis graduate. Bobby's familiarity with military schools makes him especially qualified for the Army job. And while some civilian schools might've been turned off by his age, the academy wanted an experienced Division I-A head coach who'd had success rebuilding troubled programs. Army also wanted someone who understood the special challenges faced by cadets who couldn't always put football first.

"It isn't going to be easy," says Alice, "but when you're with Bobby, you'd really rather be the underdog, because that's when he's at his best. I doubt there's a coach in the country who's won more games that he's been picked to lose than Bobby has."

Last year, after the academy dismissed Berry, it offered the job to Frank Solich, the former Nebraska coach. Solich turned it down. Next on the school's list was Ross, who says he

didn't mind being second choice. "I've never been first for any job I ever got," he says. "That's ego, anyway, and I don't let ego enter into it. I felt like, Look, you know who I am. If you want me, you want me. If you don't, you don't."

In other words, Ross didn't want to suffer through a long interview process that would force him to do anything as unseemly as boast about his career. Before being approached by Army, he had traveled to Durham, N.C., and been interviewed for the head job at Duke, but the school ultimately gave it to a younger



man, 40-year-old Ted Roof, who had performed well that season as the Blue Devils' interim coach. Ross had wanted the Duke job, and he returned home disappointed and convinced that his age would keep him unemployed. "That's the end of it," he told Alice. "It's over with, I'm getting the message."

By the time Army's athletic director, Rick Greenspan, telephoned him last November, Ross had decided to stick to his life of honey-do's and mowing the lawn. Greenspan asked him to watch Army's game with Navy on TV. Immediately after the Black Knights' 34-6 loss, the AD called Ross back and invited him to fly up to West Point for a visit. "Alice really needs to get me out of the house," Ross told Greenspan when he arrived.

A short time later he told Greenspan about his father's ap-

Fayetteville, N.C. "We knew he'd come out of retirement, and the guys on the team were wondering about his reasons for wanting to coach again."

"Coach answered in his typically humble fashion," says Greenspan, who attended the meeting. (Last week Greenspan left West Point to become athletic director at Indiana.) "He said he'd been around the game a long time and had a reasonable understanding of the military. 'You may not know this,' he said, 'but I coached in the NFL and in college, and I had some success, and we were able to win a championship and go to the Super Bowl.' It was a fairly protracted answer because Bobby was summarizing 40 years of coaching experience. But through it all he was very matter-of-fact, and you could see the guys starting to come

ALICE WAS THE PRETTIEST GIRL BOBBY HAD EVER SEEN—REALLY, THE ONLY GIRL HE'D EVER SEEN

pointment to West Point. "I could tell Bobby felt like he should be here, like he was living a bit for his dad," says Greenspan. "That's kind of how this place touches people. You feel like you're contributing to a bigger mission. As a football coach you have your job, but you're also involved in something much more meaningful. Bobby understands that football is intertwined with the military and that there are common characteristics between a football squad and a platoon: teamwork, overcoming adversity, dealing with injury. Maybe some of that is lost on young coaches. This is part of what makes it so poetic that Bobby's here now."

Greenspan offered him the job, and Ross said he needed 24 hours to mull over the decision with his wife. Alice didn't hesitate to tell him what she thought. "I let him know it was his patriotic duty to coach that team," she says. "I feel sorry for the soldiers over in Iraq and Afghanistan who have to keep hearing that the Army football team lost another game. That has to be demoralizing, and it has to stop."

At his first meeting with the Army players, Ross detailed his expectations and his plans for the future. The players were gathered in a lecture hall, scattered in the seats. "First of all, we are going to win," Ross said to begin his presentation. When he finished, some 30 minutes later, he asked if there were any questions. Linebacker Greg Washington stood up and said he had four questions, the first being why Ross thought he was the right man for the job.

"I just wanted to test him," says Washington, a senior from



WORTH THE WAIT High school sweethearts Alice and Bobby could not marry until he finished at VMI.

up off their seats. Their expressions changed. It was like, *Holy smokes! This guy knows what he's doing.*

"When Bobby finished he turned to Greg and said, 'I'm sorry, but what were your other questions?'"

"Greg said, 'That's good enough, Coach. Thanks.' Then he sat back down."

Ross interviewed the coaches on Berry's staff and decided to keep three of them, including Mumford, whom he retained as defensive coordinator. In his 90-minute meeting with Mumford, Ross asked, "What's been wrong here? Why hasn't it worked?"

There are things you'll face at West Point that you never think about at a civilian school, Mumford told him.

Like what? asked Ross.

Sleep deprivation, said Mumford.

"An Army player's day is so full that every minute that's his own is precious," Mumford says now. "When you can get him an extra hour of sleep, it's like an extra five for anybody else." On Friday afternoons before home games Mumford gave the

players three free hours to take naps in their rooms at a local hotel. "You'd have thought I'd given them a million dollars," he says. "They kept thanking me. Players at other schools might suffer from sleep deprivation, but it's more likely for reasons other than studying."

Another problem was keeping players' weight up. As Mumford explains, "The summer before their freshman year, players go through cadet basic training, and the summer after their freshman year they go through cadet field training. We see major fluct-

PHOTOGRAPH BY THE NEW YORK TIMES



tuations in weight then, I might have a 260-pound defensive lineman come in as a freshman, and by the time he reports in August he's down to 240."

Mumford ticks off other things that have kept Army from winning. Under Berry the offense was built around the passing game, but the Black Knights couldn't move the football or keep from turning it over. The defense had to spend too much time on the field, sometimes as many as 90 plays a game. Most teams try to keep that number below 70. By the time the third quarter ended, the defense was exhausted, yet it could not rest. Army ranked last in the nation in rushing in 2003, averaging only 63.5 yards per game.

One day this summer the Rosses had a team meal catered at

senior defensive end from Atlanta. "I remember he said he once coached a great quarterback at Maryland, and the guy had a different kind of name. He said it was Boomer. And we're all going, Boomer? Boomer Esiason? It's funny the way Coach does."

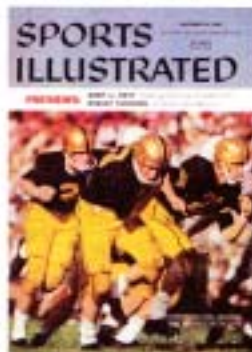
Army's sports information department considered plastering Ross's likeness on the cover of its 2004 football media guide, but Ross shot down the idea. His image eventually did make it onto the cover, but only as part of a montage that emphasized veteran players. Ross also nixed suggestions of building a season-ticket sales campaign around him.

"Dad doesn't preach humility, he just lives it," says Kevin Ross. "Don't get me wrong: He's definitely in charge. He's the boss. But he doesn't put himself on a pedestal. He's demanding, and he's

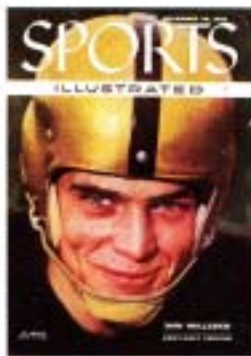
AN ARMY COACH FACES THINGS YOU NEVER THINK ABOUT AT CIVILIAN SCHOOLS, LIKE SLEEP DEPRIVATION

their stately redbrick house across Lusk Reservoir from the football stadium. The house was designed by legendary Army coach Earl (Red) Blaik, whose tenure at West Point ran from 1941 through 1958 and included a 32-game unbeaten streak with 25 straight wins. Only about 30 players were enrolled in the summer session, and they showed up expecting to find trophies, game balls and other memorabilia from Ross's career prominently displayed in the first-floor living area. Instead they found photos of Alice and Bobby with their five children and 15 grandchildren. Players had to descend to the basement den to see that Ross had a life outside his family. There they found coach-of-the-year awards for his work both in college and the NFL. They found framed copies of souvenir programs for college bowl games and professional championship games. They found framed photos of Ross with his coaching staffs at The Citadel, Maryland and Georgia Tech. Many of his assistants in the old pictures had gone on to outstanding careers as head coaches: Maryland's Ralph Friedgen, Virginia Tech's Frank Beamer, Central Florida's George O'Leary. The players also found a framed copy of a *Washington Post* story dated Nov. 11, 1984, with the headline DOWN BY 31, MD. STUNS MIAMI 42-40. Ross was coach of the Terrapins that day, when they staged the biggest come-from-behind victory in Division I-A football history.

"He's had this amazing career, but he doesn't brag about what he's done or about the players he's coached," says Will Sullivan, a



GLORY DAYS Army was a worthy cover story under coaches Blaik (top left) and Paul Dietzel.



tough, and you know you're accountable and have to get it done. But it's never about him."

ROSS'S OFFICE in Army's new Kimsey Athletic Center looks down on the south end zone of 81-year-old Michie Stadium. Occasionally he stands at the window and studies the old gray arena, and there is that rare day when he recalls the first time he ever saw the place. It was 1956, and Ross, a sophomore at VMI, was a two-way player, at quarterback and safety. "I gave up a touchdown right over there," he begins, pointing to the spot. "Well, I never saw the play, so I don't know if that's where it happened. Until I came up last season after the Navy game, that was the only time I'd ever been to West Point."

Somebody raps on the door and brings in lunch: a ham-and-cheese sandwich and a bottle of orange Gatorade. "What I remember," Ross continues, "is we stayed over at the Bear Mountain Inn. I remember it

being a beautiful day. I remember little of the playing except that their linemen were so tall, and they were getting downfield, and I had the hardest time finding the football. That sticks in my mind more than anything else, how those big, tall linemen kept coming at us. In 1956 [the Black Knights] were still a national power. They beat us—I remember that too."

Hanging on the wall next to his office door are photos of his father as a player. In one, Bus poses as if prepared to fire off the ball; in the other he throws a body block. The pictures, taken in the

PHOTOGRAPH BY JEFFREY M. HARRIS FOR SPORTS ILLUSTRATED; TOP LEFT: JEFFREY M. HARRIS; TOP RIGHT: JEFFREY M. HARRIS; BOTTOM LEFT: JEFFREY M. HARRIS; BOTTOM RIGHT: JEFFREY M. HARRIS

early 1930s, show him as a member of the Richmond Blues, a team made up of members of his National Guard unit. Bus, unable to accept his West Point appointment, never went to college and instead found a job as a freight clerk for the C&O Railroad.

"We lived in a little bungalow house in a tough neighborhood," Bobby is saying. "After work my dad would get me in this alleyway between our house and the house next door, and he'd make me tackle these bigger kids from the neighborhood. They were four or five years older than I was, but he'd send them at me and I'd have to tackle them."

Even when Bobby was preparing the Chargers for the Super Bowl, Bus, then 91, was quick to offer coaching advice. Bobby called him on Saturdays, and he could hear the roar of televised

They dated through his years at VMI. Military schools forbid cadets to get married until after graduation, so Bobby and Alice had to wait. His senior year, he interviewed for any number of jobs—with banks, with the telephone company in West Virginia, with Burlington Industries down in North Carolina—but nothing felt right, including a career in the Army. His and Alice's wedding was scheduled for the week after he got out of school, and that was the only thing he knew with certainty about his future. "Then my college coach called me and said Benedictine might be interested in having me become their head football coach," says Ross. "It was a shock to me. I was 22 years old, but they wanted me to come back."

He received a reserve commission in the Army and returned

TWO OF BOBBY'S SONS WENT TO MILITARY ACADEMIES, AND A DAUGHTER MARRIED AN ANNAPOLIS GRADUATE

college games in the background, the volume turned way up. "Bobby, you make sure those ends box them in," Bus shouted at him on the phone. "Box 'em in, Bobby. You hear me? Box 'em in."

When Bobby was 16, he landed in the men's ward of a Richmond hospital, the Retreat for the Sick, after having his appendix removed. He'd been too busy playing sports and delivering papers to bother with girls, and besides, he was too timid to look at a girl long enough to figure out if she was worth his interest. But during his recovery he met the prettiest girl he'd ever seen in his life—really, the only girl he'd ever seen. Her name was Alice Bucker (pronounced *booker*), and she was a 15-year-old student at St. Gertrude High, Benedictine's sister school. Alice was in a special training program for young women who aspired to careers in nursing.

"I sent Bobby an invitation to my 16th-birthday party, and he was the only one who answered," she recalls. "I was almost afraid to open his letter because I was afraid he had written to say he wasn't coming. But he said he was coming. Bobby was just always so shy. The girls would ask me if he'd kissed me, and I always said no, and they would tell the guys. It went on and on. For months! The guys kept track of how many dates we'd had without Bobby kissing me. They put it up on a board [at Benedictine]. Finally he kissed me, and I told the girls, and they told the guys. And when Bobby walked into school everybody was cheering and applauding. Bobby Ross had kissed me at last."



FULL SERVICE Bobby's son Kevin, a Navy graduate and former Marine, is Army's offensive coordinator.

with Alice to Richmond. That year at Benedictine he finished a miserable 1-9, but rather than discourage him, the experience convinced him that he'd found his place in the world. He wanted to coach, and he wanted to win. Ross, a devout Roman Catholic, also wanted a family, the more kids the better.

On April 8, 1960, Alice gave birth to their first child, Kenneth David, but the pregnancy had been complicated by an obstetric condition called placenta previa, and the baby died about 15 minutes after being delivered.

"The placenta came first, and all of the oxygen was cut off," says Alice. "His heart was beating, but he never took his first breath. In those days they wouldn't let the mother see the baby, but Bobby did, and it was one of the hardest things he ever had to go through. He has a strong memory of [Kenneth], and April 8 is still a painful day for us. When you go through something like that it either hurts the relationship or it creates a union that nothing can break."

Bobby was in the Army at the time, serving his active duty, hoping to return to Benedictine in July, but his service was extended when cold war tensions between the U.S. and the Soviet Union escalated. He had to give up his coaching job to continue serving with his unit, the combat-ready Third Armored Cavalry Regiment. Alice got pregnant again, and 10 days after their son Chris was born in October 1961, Bobby was bound for Europe on a troop ship. "I was bitter because I'd lost my job," he says, "but I had to



suck it up and do what I was expected to do. The Berlin Crisis had just happened, and I thought we were going to war. We spent 10 days on that ship, and it was an anxious time, but we were prepared, and I was ready for whatever came. My only real concern was having to leave my wife and son behind."

Ross and his regiment never saw action, but he looks back on his 2½ years in the Army as some of the most important in his life. They helped prepare him for his job today. "Coach Ross understands what we're going through," says Crehan, the backup quarterback. "His military background adds that much more to our respect for him. He's been there, you know?"

"The war in Iraq is real close here," Ross says. "I get e-mails and letters from former Army players who are now in Iraq and

ers leaving Blaik Field after working out on their own one day this summer. Most of them are too young to remember when Ross was building his reputation and competing for championships, but in their brief association he has impressed them with his encyclopedic football knowledge and his drive to make the Black Knights winners again. Only two weeks after arriving on post, Ross knew each player's name, position and hometown. He'd watched enough game tape to instruct every returning starter on how to improve his performance. Recruiting coordinator Tucker Waugh gave Ross a thick binder containing copies of letters he was sending to recruits. Ross read every letter and circled a number of minor mistakes, which he later brought up with Waugh.

"I'VE COME FULL CIRCLE, BECAUSE I'M AT A PLACE WHERE PLAYERS WILL RUN THROUGH A WALL FOR YOU"

Afghanistan, and I'll read some to our guys and post others on the board for them to have a look at. When a guy questions the importance of football, I'll show him those letters from former players legitimizing football in terms of what they're doing now in service to their country."

According to Bob Beretta, Army's associate athletic director for media relations, approximately 200 former Black Knights have served or are serving in Afghanistan and Iraq. If the need for U.S. troops there continues, some seniors on this year's squad can expect to see action about a year after they graduate. So far, Beretta says, no former Army football player has been killed or seriously wounded in either country. Coaches and players wake up every morning and turn on the news and hope they don't hear a name they recognize.

"The nature of this place is, you have to live day to day," says Joel Glover, a senior offensive tackle from Abilene, Texas. "You can't look ahead two months, or your head will split open. You have to live for now."

"When I first got into coaching, it seemed players would do whatever you asked them to do," says Ross. "Go run through that wall, and they'd do it. Then there were years when you knew better than to ask them to run through a wall. I guess I've come full circle, because I now find myself at a place where players are willing to run through a wall for you again."

Ross's words seem hyperbolic until you encounter his play-



BASIC TRAINING To make the Black Knights winners again, Ross is teaching them fundamentals.

"He doesn't miss anything," Waugh says. "Coaches have different opinions about what's important. Coach Berry wanted a million different pass routes. Well, Coach Ross wants to make sure that your hands are in the right place when you block. This attention to detail is why we'll be better."

Ross has abandoned Berry's one-dimensional offense and replaced it with a more balanced attack featuring a two-back set that allows the quarterback the flexibility to run the ball. To help gauge his team's success at ball control, Ross plans to chart statistics such as time of possession and three-and-outs. He also means to have his linemen knock their opponents off the football. Ross's teams have always been physical.

"We are going to bring the Commander in Chief's Trophy back to West Point," Ross told the team, stating one of his priorities for the upcoming season. He made the remark with such conviction that no one doubted it would happen. The trophy, last won outright by Army in 1996,

goes to the victor of the annual service-academy football competition. Last year it was won by Navy.

"If Coach Ross told us to jump off the top of Kimsey, everyone on the team would be in line fighting to do it," says Douglas Horaist, a senior tight end from Lafayette, La. "He's built up such a reputation around here, they'd be glad to do it."

They'd be glad to jump from the top of a four-story building? Horaist gives a nod. "I'm serious," he says. "Coach Ross knows what it takes to win, so I'm telling you, we'd do it." □